

More pencils, more books; At Ottawa's Waldorf School, technology is considered a distraction to learning and isn't introduced until students are 14, writes Matthew Pearson

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There are no computers at the Ottawa Waldorf School. No iPads, interactive whiteboards or flat-screen televisions either. Headphone wires don't dangle from ears and pockets aren't stuffed with smartphones. Students here don't even have calculators.

The only apples and blackberries used at this small private school are baked into pies that are cut into pieces as part of a lesson on fractions.

As public schools race to equip classrooms with the latest in technological gadgetry, teachers of the century-old Waldorf model take a different approach. Here, technology is seen as a distraction - something that gets in the way of creativity and saps attention spans. The focus here is on human interaction and on equipping students with analytical and imaginative skills by using basic tools, such as pencils, pens and knitting needles. It's an approach teachers, parents - and yes, even teenagers - seem to appreciate.

"Computers do have their place in school, but at the right time, and for us that would be from (age) 14 to 21," says Alan Krueger, who teaches at the small Stittsville school.

The Waldorf model is the brainchild of Rudolf Steiner, an Austrian philosopher who founded his first independent school in 1919. It was built to educate the children of employees of the Waldorf-Astoria cigarette factory in Stuttgart, Germany, and followed Steiner's particular view of educational development.

He believed there are three phases of a child's development and created a curriculum to match. The first stage, from birth to age seven, focuses on physical development; the second, from age 7 to 14, on emotional development; and the third, from 14 to 21, on intellectual development.

Introducing students to computers as an educational tool in the first or second stages, when they may not have fully developed the physical and emotional aspects of their personality, could impede the healthy development of a child's intellectual side, Krueger explains.

Computers are also guilty of providing what he calls "dead material" and often make it too easy for people to find the answer.

"It takes two or three clicks sometimes and I'm given an answer," he says. "Don't people make bigger gains when they have to, out of their own will, their own fortitude, their own creativity, come to the solution themselves? Plants grow better if you give them time to grow and nourish them and we're trying to do the same thing."

In Juanita Stein's Grade 2 and 3 class, where the desks have been pushed aside to create an open space on the floor, students are given several blue cards that each contain a letter of the alphabet. Quietly, the students work together to put the letters in order from A to Z.

Across the hall, the students in Deborah Wilkins' Grade 4 and 5 class stand in a circle and pass beanbags to each other following a set pattern.

Wilkins adds beanbags one at a time, gently upping the ante. The exercise teaches students to co-operate and also trains their eyes to follow the beanbag, which is helpful for improving reading skills.

The Grade 6 and 7 students are having a music lesson. They each play a recorder, which they store in colourful sacks they knit for themselves when they were six years old

And in Krueger's Grade 8 class, it's time for a geography lesson, with the class drawing a map of Canada by hand and locating the major bodies of water.

The students create their own elaborate textbooks, where each keeps notes, makes illustrations and compiles all subjects into one place.

Teachers also combine mental and physical tasks, such as saying multiplication tables out loud while skipping, and encourage students to eat their way through fractions.

The students cut up fruit into pieces - halves, quarters, eighths and so on - and then, as a class, bake pies, which are also cut up into fractions.

Feed your brain, and then some.

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Logan Aylesworth used to go to a Catholic school in his Barrhaven neighbourhood. But he ran into a variety of troubles there, namely bullying and teasing.

A teacher flagged him as perhaps having some behavioural issues, so his parents had the young boy assessed. There was nothing diagnosable.

"Then we started considering, well, maybe if there's nothing wrong with him, maybe there's something wrong with the environment he's in," says Logan's father, Jason.

He and his wife explored several private schools before settling on Waldorf, which Aylesworth says aligns with the family's values.

"We've never exposed our kids to a lot of television. It was just something we didn't think was that important or that good for them and then we found a school that shared that same philosophy."

The same goes for other types of technology commonly used in many classrooms today. "At the old school, they were trying to bring in Smart Boards. That was the big thing they were pushing the year we left, and we'd never understood what the purpose was," Aylesworth says. "How can they teach better than a teacher with physical, tactile things?"

It's not so much that the technology is bad, but rather that traditional, hands-on techniques are better, he says. Krueger agrees that interactive whiteboards, among other things, risk interrupting a child's imagination.

If, for example, he is telling his class a story about a blacksmith, every student conjures in their own mind what a blacksmith looks like based on what they have read or learned previously.

But if Krueger had a Smart Board, he'd simply click on a link and every student would look at the same picture of a blacksmith.

No imagination needed. "We're trying to promote lifelong learning to continue to foster their innate curiosity," he says.

Grade 8 student Nora Joyner came to the Waldorf school last year after several years at a Kanata public school.

Had her family lived closer at the time, they would have sent Nora and her younger sister to the school from the beginning, says her father, Allan Joyner.

He likes the smaller classes, the non-competitive atmosphere and the understated, non-denominational focus on students' spiritual side. And he welcomes the absence of technology, saying his daughters aren't missing out.

"A lot of what amounted to research (at the old school) was copy/paste, copy/paste, Google/copy/paste," he says. "To me, that's not research.

"They weren't learning any computer skills at the other schools.

"They just had (computers) and I think they had them much too much and a lot of times in unsupervised ways."

Adds Aylesworth: "Most technology these days is designed for my mom to use. If my mom can learn it, a kid can pick it up, whether it's at five or eight or 13.

"They'll pick it up very quickly whenever they get exposed to it, so waiting a few years, I don't think, harms them in the least, and it broadens their experiences beyond that so they're not dependent on it."

It's worth noting neither man is a technophobe. In fact, they both work closely with computers every day - Joyner as a video producer, Aylesworth a software developer.

But their opinions about computers in the classroom appear to be shared by others in the sector.

Employees of eBay, Google and Apple all send their children to Waldorf schools.

"I would hope my kids will go into the high-tech sector eventually as adults," Aylesworth says. "That would be a career I'd fully endorse, but there's no hurry to learn that stuff."

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There are those who would roll their eyes at the Waldorf model, who would find all those wooden desks, handmade dolls and No. 2 pencils desperately antiquated.

Those who would fret if their child couldn't read by the time he or she entered the first grade.

Even Joyner, who now wishes there was a Waldorf high school in Ottawa, wasn't initially sold on the notion.

"I found the initial backwardness appearance of it a little off-putting," he says. "It looked like a 1930s classroom.

"There's no computers, everything is done by hand, there's no pop culture anywhere to be seen in the place. It just looks different."

Nowhere is that difference more pronounced than in the total absence of technology.

Ron Lancaster, a senior lecturer at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, has mixed feelings about the tech free approach.

"It makes me sad to think that there's some students not getting some of these things, but on other hand, maybe they're getting something that's just as good," he says.

Lancaster, whose research interests include hand-held technologies and the role they play in the classroom, believes everyone can benefit from a little bit of technology.

"I'd actually argue all students (benefit) because you can really present things in ways that would be very difficult on paper and you can also let students be interactive with it, and that's the one thing that I'd be a little worried about with a school like this unless they're doing things that gets the same result overall."

Lancaster hasn't visited a Waldorf school, but says he's generally impressed by what he's read or heard about the model.

Although he's pro-technology, it remains unclear even to him how its use in schools will play out in the long run.

"Even though there may be some fabulous benefits from the use of technology, if, in the end, you have students who can't sit still for five minutes because they're texting all the time, are we ahead or would it better to do what they've done at the Waldorf school?"

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All seven students in Krueger's Grade 8 class have a computer at home and most use it daily.

But here in their classroom, there's not a screen in sight.

"I don't really see any reason for them," says Bridget Whitlock, 14. "We've done fine without them so far."

"We do a lot more hands-on work than you would in other classrooms," adds classmate Nora Joyner.

Unlike the others, Nora spent years in a public school and has a basis for comparison. The lack of computers in the school, for her, has had at least one side effect: "My handwriting's improved," she says.

Bridget, Nora and the rest of the class are off to high school in September.

They don't appear to be any more nervous than a typical teen making the same transition and, after getting a glimpse earlier this year at a Grade 9 math textbook, they're not too worried about being behind their public school-educated peers.

Still, it's hard to say if the Waldorf model produces better results because the schools aren't results-based, meaning there are no standardized tests or other benchmarks to use for comparison.

And it doesn't come cheaply. Annual tuition at the school is \$9,746 (there's a sliding scale for families with two or more children attending).

The Association of Waldorf Schools of North America, which accredits the continent's 160 schools and 250 early childhood centres, boasts that in its own survey of graduates 94 per cent attended college or university, with a near-even split between those in arts and humanities and those in math or science.

But Krueger, who has taught the same group of students since most were in Grade 2, has his own benchmark. He says he's pleased when former students get to high school and pose thoughtful, probing questions to their teachers; when they are more focused on learning for learning's sake than acing exams.

"I've heard some of my students grumble about that," he says.

"They say, 'Mr. Krueger, why can't we just explore something and not have to worry about the test at the end?'"

"I am happy when I hear they score A's or win a number of awards, but that's not my goal."

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